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How to implement effective social selling on LinkedIn?

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<p>This study was conducted to identify the most useful method for social selling in modern selling techniques which have become increasingly intertwined with social media. The thesis aims to convey information on how to build relationships into more profitable business and give insight on what are the important aspects to focus on when using social media in the B2B context with the hopes of generating more leads and turning them into successful customer relationships.</p> <p>The study was compiled with literature from the field of social media, sales and marketing and consists of existing online and offline source material. The literature review and various parts of the thesis have been selected with a focus on the most important aspects of creating a successful social selling strategy.</p> <p>The study does not try to focus on the exact type of content that would be successful in the social selling process but more toward what is relevant to each field where a business operates. Instead, the focus is on how to create social selling in general with beneficial tips in the form of identifying new leads of which some may turn into customer relationships. Managing marketing and sales functions together towards the same goal was found as a difficult task, but if conducted right, a very positive aspect of successful social selling operation.</p> <p>The author stresses the importance of knowing your customer segment as well as creating buyer personas, whose needs are targeted with appropriate and relevant content. It is important to develop a written social selling strategy and connect marketing and sales functions with unified, measurable metrics to be more effective at social selling</p>	
Keywords	Social selling, customer relationships, B2B context, buyer persona

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1 Introduction

Modern professional life is in many ways linked to different social media and out of those LinkedIn is the one where professionals gather to learn from one another and teach one another. Social selling is very much one of the actions professionals engage in and in case you happen to count yourself as a professional and are in fact also using linkedin social selling could very well be something that you may find very useful to learn more about. Understanding how social selling works may not directly affect and have a link to everyone's professional life but being a thought leader or a person that shares valuable insights concerning their field of expertise for example, can surely boost your career in case you at some point wish to make changes or go down a different path. Being a professional that people listen to and a person who is engaged with others in meaningful conversations is someone that, to me at least, is the essence of a successful executor of social selling strategy. As you will find out later on social selling is somewhat different from traditional selling.

Every social media is essentially the same, it is a platform where different types of content is shared with entities that are somehow connected. Entities that exist in social media can be natural entities as people or unnatural such as companies. They can be hybrids of these such as one person company engaging with the social community with highly personal content created for business purposes or even something entirely different.

According to Statista, LinkedIn does not currently penetrate the top15 most popular social media networks as of January 2020 ranked by the number of active users. (statista.com, 2020) However, LinkedIn is more popular than YouTube and only slightly less popular than Twitter in the eyes of marketers worldwide thus the study conducted in January 2019 places the social media as fourth most popular worldwide in this regard. (Statista, 2020) Even as LinkedIn does not top as the most popular social media in general effective usage of it will offer the user professional opportunities other platforms do not and these are due to the detailed professional profile information found on LinkedIn which is much more broad and useful than on Facebook or Instagram for example, albeit that those platforms offer business potential as well for both individuals and companies. Professionals looking to expand their career horizon will turn to LinkedIn as the social

media to advertise their talent and availability as well as scope the available opening in the job market.

LinkedIn offers opportunities for both personal and professional gain for individuals. Sharing insights and connecting with other professionals are only a few possible ways of making the most out of the platform. It can possibly be difficult to separate personal and professional in LinkedIn as unlike Facebook or Instagram for example, both of which are strongly personal and places where life outside of work is considered more appropriate content, LinkedIn is the platform where professional and personal are sort or intertwined. As a professional human being, what you share is what you are, whether that is original content, commenting something that has been posted on the platform or simply reacting with a like or with other possible options. Professionalism and being a professional does include expressing professional attire while on LinkedIn as well and even if sometimes voicing highly controversial opinions or raising deeply personal frustrations can even be encouraged on other platforms, after having used LinkedIn extensively I have yet to personally witness any clear indication that LinkedIn should be used in this regard. The study will aim to answer many of the possible issues that may arise when using social media and provide valuable insight on best practises and effective usage of the platform used by millions of professionals worldwide.

1.1 LinkedIn as a social media network

LinkedIn was formed in Reid Hoffmans apartment in 2002 and the official launch was on May 5, 2003. Reid is also one of the co-founders of the popular online Payment solution Paypal as well as has been an important investor in the early stages of some other familiar companies such as Facebook and Airbnb. (Inc.com 2018) At the time of writing this LinkedIn's user base is over 200 countries wide and over 660 million big. (Linkedin.com) The company's mission and vision are closely linked to offering opportunities for people to connect with others to possibly gain economic benefit but also help them be more successful and productive in life. (Linkedin.com) The current CEO of the company is Jeff Weiner and he has previously been on the board of executives in such companies as Microsoft and Google among other major corporations. LinkedIn's business side offers advertisement options for companies that create revenue for the social media giant, but unlike Facebook for example, LinkedIn offers membership subscriptions

for individuals and these we will look more into later in the thesis. As well as these LinkedIn also offers recruitment solutions for professionals of the world. (Linkedin.com)

1.2 Exploration objectives and question(s)

The research question and the raison d'être of this thesis is to learn how to use social media as a tool for social selling and the aim of the project is to try to identify good methods of conducting a successful social selling strategy.

The thesis is compiled as a literature review from the field of social media, sales, marketing and consists of existing online and book sources as well as it uses also secondary research data from online sources.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Sales Process

In order to understand social selling, the basics of selling need to be investigated as social selling is essentially selling on social media. A good example of the basics of sales process is given by Dave Kahle (2019) in an article published in the American Salesman where he explains the process from start to finish. The process starts with prospecting which means identifying potential clients that may have needs which you or your company could fulfill with the product or service you are planning to sell. In the article this is the step one which is called "engage with the right people" (Kahle 2019). Recognizing the right people is essential as without properly executing this the sales process will have a negative start and the likelihood that the process will not end successfully increases.

Step two after identifying the right people and engaging with them is making them feel comfortable around you where the notion is that the more comfortable they are around you the more likely they are to spend time with you thus giving you opportunity to learn from them and present your solution to their needs. The article explains

They may be convinced to do business with you because of the fundamental attractiveness of your offer, but it will be action taken against the grain. They will be forever uncomfortable and eager to find a replacement.

However when a potential customer is more comfortable inside the sales process they are more likely to open up about their needs which through series of questions takes the process to the third step which is called “find out what they want”. Kahle believes that this step is “the heart of selling - the essence what a salesperson is about.” Simply pushing a product or a service without finding out whether it is even suitable or not for the needs of the potential clients is less likely to bring mutually beneficial results than finding out those needs and seeking the potential to fulfill them with the offering at hand. Kahle inserts special emphasis on the last point which he wishes to express in this the third step which is “the primary way that you learn, with depth and detail, what the customer wants is to ask good questions”.

After the customer has expressed their wants and needs it is time to try to find out whether those can be matched with what the sales is about which is providing solution to the clients problem. (Kahle 2019) Fulfilling those needs can be executed in a face-to-face as well as communicating through social media, the forum on which the sales process is conducted does not change the fundamentals. Kahle explains that the best way to find out whether the product or service offer matches and fulfills the needs of the potentials client is through properly places questions while giving the presentation about what you have on offer. (Kahle 2019)

If the potential customer is interested and the response has been positive then the next step is to make an agreement regarding purchasing and accepting the offer made by the salesperson. Kahle emphasizes that “The agreement is the ultimate rationale for the sales call and the aspect that makes it a “sales” call.” However, no actual call is mandatory and business can be conducted also face-to-face or via email for example but the point is that salesperson is looking for that “yes” to the offer that has been made. “Clearly, you generally don’t gain agreement without asking for it.” (Kahle 2019)

After the purchase has been made and the potential customer has been made to a customer comes the point in sales which is also very important: taking care of the customer after the sales and this is important for multiple reasons. The salesperson may be focused already on the next sale for the next customer but forgetting the past sale can be very costly due to customer dissatisfaction which leads to no new sales and possible bad reputation due to the reason that people tend to talk about bad experiences to others. Keeping an old customer is cheaper than using time and resources to find a new one. Kahle explains yet again why asking is very important as “how would

you find out if the customer is satisfied without asking?" What the salesperson can also do is ask whether the possibly satisfied customer has any other potential needs that need fulfilment. Kahle (2019) also points out that asking for referrals is also important as potential customers could very well be interested in hearing stories from already happy customers to help their decision making.

It may seem like selling and the process of it is multi-layered and very complicated and the truth is that in some instances this may be the case but the following chapter will help in understanding the underlying simplicity in doing business with a simplistic example.

2.1.1 Selling in its simplicity

One of the most simple forms of selling is when a person enters a grocery store for example, engages in decision making inside the store, chooses a product such as milk for example, goes to the register to make the purchase and after giving money and having received a receipt and possible change walks out with said milk. Transaction has been made where the store received money in exchange for a good such as milk in this example. It is a legal action as well, a deal has been made at the register between the customer and the store regarding purchasing a product that the store is carrying in its selection. The store sells and the customer buys. In this example the selling is more reactive as the customer is the more active party and makes the steps from entering the store to leaving with the purchased product. This transaction happened on the business to consumer market as the other side was a private citizen, a customer, and the seller party was a business entity even though at the register the sales clerk was a person as well.

In their article Andrea Dixon et al. (2012) propose the definition of sales as

the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value-creation context.

The human driven interaction in the example given is the individual (customer) walking into the grocery (organization) and economic exchange is the currency that changed

owner as the value-creation context (buying of milk to satisfy the need of that milk experienced by the customer) is the force that is driving the whole process.

2.1.2 Brief history and evolution of sales and its processes

Ever since people have had needs, transactions have been made. First it was goods changed for other goods but after the invention of money transactions evolved as people could accumulate wealth in the form of currency that can be used to buy the goods that are needed to fulfill the needs. Adam Smith (1723-1790) wrote an important piece called *The Wealth of Nations* which itself is not a book about sales but rather a piece that explains the theory and reasons why sales exists in the modern world. According to Smith, people's organic leaning towards their own interests results in value-added for themselves and everyone else. (Kernohan 2015) Smith talks about an invisible hand that is our individual need guiding the fulfilment of our self-interests which results to the surrounding society benefitting as well. Sales is essentially about filling those needs but in different contexts depending on the situation sales process is performed in.

Sales is done to fulfill someone's needs, either personal (Business to customer, later B2C or consumer sales) or organizational (Business to business, later B2B). It is not purposeful to document here every possible situation the sales people might find themselves in and every different type of sales model in the history of sales and its processes. However, it is noteworthy that sales has developed over time and will continue to develop not only thanks to new technologies which enable taking meetings remotely for example and presenting the offering instantaneously to the other side of the world if need be, but also due to people and their customs evolving as well. Sales and its processes are like life - many things have changed since Adam Smith walked on this earth and will continue to change after writing this report. Hopefully this will enable who ever is interested in finding the key details and information they need for what ever purpose it shall serve for them.

Mark Savinson explains in the *Forbes Magazine* (Mark Savinson 2020) his idea closely related to the ever evolving nature of sales, processes and the playing field in which the different entities operate sums it well by explaining that:

Successful species evolve. Unsuccessful species die out. From my perspective, nowhere is this more noticeable than in the modern-day business-to-business (B2B) sales environment, where changes in buying patterns and behavior mean that salespeople must evolve or risk becoming irrelevant.

With thorough inspection of this quote it is very apparent that the people working in sales and closely related to sales will have to keep up with the times and technologies to be able to stay relevant. The research is meant to work as a guideline and help for who ever wishes to learn to use social selling and understanding the principle of constantly updating one's professionalism will most likely be one of the key take aways in this document. Savingson asks also a valid question about whether nowadays salespeople are needed at all as according to an Accenture (Accenture 2020) report 57% of B2B customers go through the entire buying process without meeting a sales representative. However, as 65% still find value in discussing their situations with salespeople according to a Miller Heiman Groups study conducted in 2018 (Miller Heiman Group 2018) it is clear that salespeople are far from obsolete. The study (Miller Heiman Group 2018) shows that 62% salespeople are likely to only meet buyers' expectations where as only 32% of respondents told that their expectations were surpassed by the salesperson. Looking at the numbers it seems clear that keeping up with current technologies and methods, asking the right questions and surpassing the expectations are vital, but not only the B2B business but in B2C commerce as well as not every salesperson can fit into that important 32%. Savingson (Mark Savinson 2020) ends with an important note: "it is the willingness of the business to adapt that will determine who evolves fastest, smartest and ultimately comes out on top" and this essentiality is something that has not changed during history and will not change in the future. In the next chapter we move closer to today and focus on a subject that made social selling possible in the first place.

2.1.3 Digitalization

Digitalization is a big word with vague meaning but it is a megatrend in business. (Hans Gillior 2018) Megatrend means essentially something that you can not ignore in business. Gillior compares digitalization to megatrends of the size of liberalism for example. Hanna Timonen and Johanna Vuori explain digitalizations as "the infusion of digital capabilities into nearly all facets of work... [which], is rapidly reshaping not only markets and industries, but also the workplace." Digitalization has also an affect which may not be the first things that comes into mind as according to Vuori and Timonen (Timonen & Vuori 2018) digitalization changes the work visibility as well and this is examined in the context of business-to-business sales work. Visibility is increased in relation to the salesperson's co-workers, however is it decreased in the eyes of the customer. Visibility manifests as other colleagues being able to follow up and even comment on other work more closely due to the digital nature of keeping records of activities on CRM(customer relation

management) software for example. Online meeting taken together or privately in a meeting room can be observed by others not actually taking part in the conversation. According to Gillior rather than a technical evolution digitalization is an industrial and social revolution that stems from the citizens' and customers' relation to business. Digitalization has the possibility not only to change the ways we work or think but will have a profound impact on our lives as well also in the future as it is continuously evolving. Digitalization is causing disruption (Gillior 2018) and embracing the possibilities it has to offer is something a salesperson needs to accept and adjust to. Savingson (Mark Savinson 2020) described about the adaptiveness of a given business being linked to who comes on top in the end, embracing digitalization is as true and as important to the salesperson.

2.1.4 Business to business market explained

Business to business market can sometimes be referred as B2B market. It is essentially the same as consumer market that was elaborated in the section 2.1.1. with the exception that both parties in the selling transaction are business entities. In this case the companies are again represented by people on each side and business actions such as negotiations, offer and acceptance are conducted by people but on behalf of the company. The transaction in the sales process will include funds of the company in exchange for a good or a service bought for the company. The people act merely as agents taking care of the whole process.

2.1.5 Sales Techniques

To make things simple the author would like to divide sales techniques to two different categories or approaches to selling which each host almost an infinite amount of variations and methods of usage below them according to the person performing the tasks. These two umbrella categories are talking-based and listening-based selling. Talking-based selling is essentially the same as telling and listening-based is learning which may be called consultative selling as well. (Brian Tracy 1996) Tracy explains that the telling approach is based on a technique where as the listening more about instinct and understanding. Telling is about achieving the order, listening is about building a relationship with the potential buyer. With the relationship customers can view the salesperson as an advisor that can be trusted which is more than just a salesperson. The advisor has the

customers best interests at heart and can be trusted to help the client with decisions regarding purchasing the product or a service the person has for offer.

2.1.6 Sales funnel

This is the whole journey from customer perspective from gaining awareness of the existence of the product or service for example that is available the buying decision. The next picture will explain the different steps the client will go through in the process and which parts are affected by sales function. The figure 1 below is very much linked to part 2.1.2 regarding the history of sales as you can see the responsibilities and the parts in which sales and marketing are taking part in the customer buying process have fluctuated over time.

The parts or phases the customer goes through are awareness of the products existence and who the seller is followed by interest regarding the product on offer. After which comes consideration phase of the product on offer but also the company and everything that is linked to purchase including other options such as rivals. The fourth phase is intent where the intention to buy has been reached and communicated but the details of the purchase have yet been reached. Evaluation stage is where different options are weighed in and all the aspects of the purchase related to customer business for example are being evaluated. Purchase is the last stage where customer has decided to buy the product and the deal has been made. Previously sales had a bigger responsibility and marketing was affecting customers journey from awareness to early consideration at which point sales took over. Now marketing is guiding customer through the different steps until evaluation part where sales is taking the role of closing the deal with the customer.



Figure 1. The new marketing sales funnel explaining the different steps clients go through in their purchasing process. (Devon S. Johnson and Sundar Bharadwaj, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 2005)

What the figure does not hold is something that many times happens after the purchase has been made. The buyer party may have similar needs in the future as well so a re-purchase process needs to be initiated. (Kiran 2020) This starts with a reevaluation phase. The customer may realise that the purchase was a positive experience in one way or another and wishes to make a repurchase. They enter this re-evaluation phase after the initial purchase in which they will eventually decide if they want to renew the contract made in the purchase phase or the first deal. After the reevaluation phase comes the repurchase phase (Kiran 2020) where the customer decides to buy the product if the previous stage has led to this decision.

2.1.7 Customer Relation Management

Every business needs customers. Customers buy what companies have to offer and with that money companies can continue doing business by paying the employees' salaries, rents, possible purchases that are needed in production, equipment and so on. In short to have all this and keep the company running you need customers in one form or another. There is an old saying that goes "happy customer is a repeat customer". Where this saying has originated is unknown and different variations of the saying circulate in

the literature but what is certain, and this is something everyone can evaluate themselves, is that if a customer is happy they are more likely to return in case they have a repeated similar need in the future. This is reflected in an B2C online survey report conducted by Servicechannel.com in 2019 (Tire Business 2019) from which one of the key takaways was that:

When retailers offer great in-store experiences, shoppers spend more time in stores, make more impulse purchases, come back more often and think more favorably about the brand.

A study conducted by Mirkó Gátia, Ariel Mitev and András Bauerc in 2018 explains the the assumption that increasing amount of usage of technology and its evolution has a link with the customers ability to use information and this leads increased customer satisfaction and retainment. (Gátia et al. 2018) In social selling technology is in the center of it all as different social media work as the platform for social selling. As the salesforce nowadays is armed with plethora of means to communicate with clients and tailor them to fit the clients needs Gátia et al. predict this development having a positive effect on buyer-seller relationships which is the heart of customer relation management. They also discuss about customers ever growing expectations which can be found with market research, these expectations naturally include managing the relationship as well and they mention competitive advantage as possible benefit for those who emphasize new technologies, methods and ways of dealing with the customer. Sales force is a key player in this regard as they are in the front line to customer relation management.

As previously explained in figure 1, sales and marketing have both important roles inside the company they operate in. Those roles are intertwined and may even overlap. Especially in social selling and but also in selling in general it is wise to utilize the help marketing offers and to have better use of it comes with better understanding of marketing. The following will aim to bring some light into what is marketing and why is it needed especially in social selling.

3 Marketing

3.1.1 What is marketing?

If you want customers you need marketing to raise awareness in potential buyers regarding the goods or services you have for sale. Very rarely the customer develops a

sudden need for a product that, for the customer at that point may not even exist, and the customer begins a random search trying to find out whether their needs might be fulfilled with offering on the market. Even in cases like this marketing is required for the customer to be able to complete the search.

Kotler's (2010 p. 28) simple definition of marketing is managing profitable customer relationships. Not all customer relationship are profitable though and he sheds some more light into the definition by including the twofold goal of marketing which is "to attract new customers by promising superior value and to keep and grow current customers by delivering satisfaction". According to Kotler (2010 p. 29) marketing can be experienced in many different forms in our daily lives such as in advertisements in our TV screens or marketing may be falling from our mail boxes into the apartment, the ads you see on social media are one good example as well. In essence marketing is communication that has a purpose and which may appear in different forms via different channels. Kotler (2010) explains modern marketing not in the traditional "telling and selling" way of making sales but it is rather about understanding customer needs and delivering value in a product. Kotler talks about management guru Peter Drucker's view on marketing which goes "the aim of marketing is to make selling unnecessary". (Kotler 2010 p. 29) In the context of this thesis, one could expand Drucker's view into the following: "the aim of marketing is to help social selling make traditional selling unnecessary".

3.1.2 How is marketing linked to selling

Sales and marketing should work closely, be it social selling where marketing may help salesperson's activities with content creation or then for example salespeople may give lists of contacts to marketing for promotion purposes. These two departments should work well together, although pointed out in an article published in The Harvard Business Review (Kotler, Rackham & Krishnaswamy 2006) many times this does not happen and the division is caused by two different opinions in causes related to economy and culture.

Understanding the "why" of these problems will help in understanding the other side of the problem which will help in situations of conflict also in social selling where, as said before, the two functions may offer each other much help and this is why these differences in how the functions view the world is covered in this part.

Companies and functions inside those companies have a budget. The budget has been created by the people above those who use it. The economical cause for the hostility stems from sales people criticizing marketing's usage of the budget on three of the four P's. (Kotler et al. 2006) These four P's are price, product, placement and promotion and according to Richard Etteson (et al. 2013) this product focused orientation of marketing which hovers around those four elements requires an overhaul as it is not directly linked to the idea of providing solutions for the needs of customers. This theory of marketing that has that has served consumer marketers well for half a century weakens B2B marketers in three different ways. (Etteson et al. 2013) It guides both of the teams to emphasis product technology and quality even though these are not differentiators but the cost of entry. Building robust cases for the sublime value of their product is not the primary target and also it makes them lose focus on their position as the clients' problems solvers and advice providers. (Etteson at al. 2013)

Instead of using the old 4 p's Etteson et al. offers a SAVE framework to update the firms selling strategy:

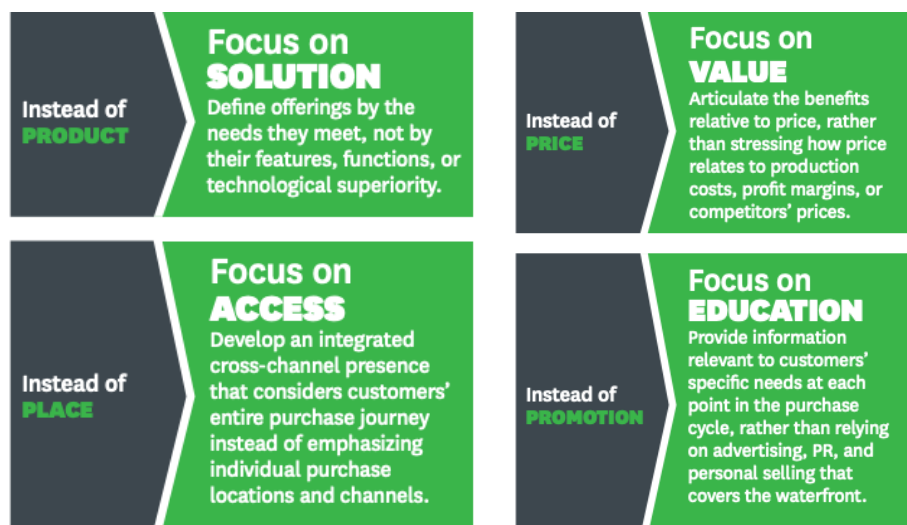


Figure 2. SAVE framework (Etteson et al. 2013)

The framework above explains the alternatives that should be used instead of the original 4 P's and B2B marketing should adapt to this new model instead of sticking to the old one which may result in an expensive but also unproductive technological contest.

The cultural cause for hostilities that exist between marketers and sales people lies in the different types of people these two functions attract. (Kotler et al. 2006) Understanding these will help either party engaged in social selling with the other. People working

with marketing, who have had a more formal education of these two functions, are according to Kotler (2006) more analytic, project focused and data oriented by nature. Sales has sometimes a problem seeing the action performed by marketing as their own tasks are much more visible and many times happen outside the office premises. Instead of the formal education sales people have people skills and they are relationship builders who want to keep moving and it is not a surprise that these two different groups of people are going towards alterations between each other. (Kotler et al. 2006) The two groups have different incentives and their performance is also evaluated differently. These matters affect their view on the company's offering accordingly for example what should be put emphasis on, which products to sell and focus on with marketing input the most et cetera.

Kotler et al. offer the idea incorporating integrated sales and marketing metrics as a solution which would essentially mean that the lives of these two functions inside the company would be more closely linked as they would be measured as one. Enabling effective social selling the functions should play well together and undercommunicating, underperforming and overcomplaining working relationship is the death of this idea. (Kotler et al. 2006) Salespeople have detailed knowledge about the customers, sharing that knowledge with marketing will help better serving their needs, possibly build better products based on this knowledge and most definitely help create better content that drives the social selling aspect of the business.

4 Social Media

4.1.1 Different Social Media

Different social media serve different uses and purposes, they do not the same and some can successfully be used only with a mobile phone such as TikTok and Instagram for example. These two are designed that way because the intent is to be used via mobile only. Instagram for example is accessible via desktop through a browser but the user interface is not the same and the experience will lack the same ease of usage as featured in the mobile application. Instagram is usually associated with pictures as there mobile app does not present you much of text unless you perform actions that reveal the hidden text such as scrolling or tapping. The main idea of Instagram is to share stories via pictures or video.

Facebook on the other hand performs much better as a platform where stories and news can be published. Facebook is easily accessible through the computer browser and in my view the user who choose to use the platform this way is much better off regarding using all the features such a as search or filtering options but also if you wish to type a story, share a picture with it and post it on Facebook you have a better view of everything that needs to be followed and completed in the process. Facebook also has a mobile application much like LinkedIn and Instagram, the use of the platform is very similar to LinkedIn which also in my view is more manageable through browser than the application on mobile phone.

Youtube, which according to Statista (Statista. 2020) is the second most used social media in the world. Youtube focuses entirely on videos, long or short ones, with a commenting option of course and is a platform that companies can use to share their tutorials for example. The commercial potential of Youtube is very much there with possibility of linking videos on the platform to other social media such as Facebook or LinkedIn and sharing them there.

TikTok (or Douyin as it is called in China) is an application where short videos are shared. It is very much like Instagram only with 100% video content and the focus is on fast paced story telling due to the short nature of the videos.

Twitter is mainly a text based social media where the message is limited by the number of characters and the number currently stands at 280. On September 26 2017 Twitter announced (Rosen, A. and Ihara, I., 2017) that they will double the possible length of tweets from 140 characters to 280. Sharing pictures and links for example is also possible.

LinkedIn is a social media used by millions of professionals worldwide mainly for professional purposes. Different social media is used for different purposes, using LinkedIn the same way as Instagram or Twitter for example can possibly create negative impact on user's professional image as different platforms require different approach and types of information to be shared.

The vast amount of different social media that exists in the world would require a thesis length just to go through as there are smaller and regional media even here in Finland.

The listed above are selected due to being easily available to English speaking community and they have a clear possibility for commercial application in them. The list is not exhaustive but represents the writers' view of the most important social media used by companies in the English speaking world.

4.1.2 Content

Content is something you share on different social media. A piece of text, a video, a picture or a long story for example. Content may be created by you in which case the content is called "original content" meaning that it originates in the place where the creator has posted it. For example posting a picture taken on your holiday to Mexico on Facebook is technically original content, as you were the person taking the picture and posting it, but in this case a separate mention of the picture being "original content" is usually not necessary. If you publish a story however, you may wish to include the mention as then, if not otherwise very clear, your followers on the social media platform immediately know that you are the original source for this specimen of content. Creating content requires creativity thus ease of creating content may differ depending on the creativity of a given author.

4.1.3 Social selling explained

After hovering around the main subject it is finally time to focus on the thesis header topic and get to the nitty gritty. What is social selling in fact? Perhaps it is easier to start with what is clearly is not social selling. Social selling is not opening Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn or any other social media that you may use as a platform for your work, selecting that nice picture or a brochure that marketing created regarding your company's next event for example and typing a prepared set of nice sentences to go with the visual content before posting clicking send. That is called advertising.

Connecting with your audience and actually performing social selling requires a personal touch, ready made material posted by several members of your work community at the same time via the same channel is hardly personal nor even audience targeted. Social selling is something quite new that everyone working in sales or marketing my view should understand and should be able to separate from advertising. If you wish to have an advantage over your competition, thought leadership gained by using social selling effectively may well be that one thing that secures the next dear instead of it going to

someone else. Though leadership means a situation where a person is regarded as an authority in certain field or a subject, thought leadership can also exist in social selling. If you have a person in your social media connections who you personally regard as a figure that “knows what they are talking about” and you see as an expert, they are a thought leader to you. Most likely to others as well. In case this person is working in sales and is sharing interesting insights, offers guidance in problematic situations or is commenting in a way that makes others agree with him you may have encountered a person that is performing very well as a social seller.

Social selling is not about direct selling nor is it about the type of advertising mentioned earlier, it is more about connecting with and building relationship with people in a way that can quite possibly help you personally in the future regarding possible business opportunities. Building this relationship of trust and thought leaderness is not a 100m sprint but a marathon that will not happen over night. A simple example of a successful social selling strategy by a salesperson would be a lead created by person’s expertise that has convinced another person to refer others in need of the services provided by the thought leader directly to that person. This happens on LinkedIn all the time and in case you have not created a LinkedIn account and are a business professional, do yourself a favour and create the account as soon as possible. Lead is a possible business opportunity, in LinkedIn this most likely means a person that is looking to fulfil their needs and the thought leader having established a successful social selling strategy is the person others refer the possible future client to as they feel that the salesperson having shared great insight in their view is the person the client needs to talk to. In essence your successful sharing of thoughts and insights that have helped you to connect with others has made it possible that your audience is actually helping you gain more business.

Someone else giving you as a reference as a good person to talk to regarding fulfilling their possible needs is a powerful message from a person who they most likely trust in one way or another. You can think a situation where your friend gives you a heads up on a product or a service that you might find useful or are actually in need of. Will you trust that recommendation made by someone you know? Would you trust your friend more than a salesperson selling you that same exact product or a service? One very important goal which social selling aims to reach is gaining this trust. Earlier Drucker’s saying was updated to “the aim of marketing is to help social selling make traditional selling unnecessary”, the process’ aim is exactly this and previously explained chain of procedures is merely one way of succeeding in this. This is extra bit of help is very useful in a situation

where lead generation is otherwise performing less than adequately but of course the buying process should be focused on as well. If social selling brings customers they need to be able to buy too and adding social selling as another tool to the set used in selling is not sufficient alone if the buying process has not been fine tuned to echo the situation in which the customer is already half way through the door in the buying process. Social selling is about building a relationship with people and the better you are in building relationships with people most likely the better you will succeed in social selling.

4.1.4 Social selling procedures and the way of looking at content

Leads generated through social selling activities will go through the same sales funnel as leads from any other source. Some leads eventually develop as buying customers where as some leads may drop out in the process due to buying constraints such as price not being right. However, what is enormously different in this process is the situation in which the customers is when entering the sales funnel. Research indicates that the customers are 57% of the way through the funnel without ever engaging with a salesperson and in some cases the figure may be as high as 90%. (p. 60-70, Belew 2014) The customer is in charge of the buying process; the part where sales engages with the prospective clients lies at the very end where the client is offered product demonstrations or quotas for example and at this point the client may have other possible companies under consideration and the buying process has long passed the stage where the salesperson would have has the possibility of influencing the clients' purchasing decision. (p. 60-70, Belew 2014)

Belew promotes the idea that in order to build a relationship and make leads finish the entire funnel thus becoming customers, content should be used in the following five ways:

- The content should promote constant top of mind awareness
- The content should provide useful information
- The content should help establishing trust and credibility as a legitimate source.
- The content should capitalize on peer-to-peer influence

- The content should target buyers in different stages of buying, different buyer personas (buyer persona is the same as a profile of typical buyer or an individual in the demograph you wish to target) and also different social networks

Having multiple buyer personas is the same as having a heterogeneous target group, you most likely will not sell to a single type of individual or a company but the target varies at least to a degree. Knowing your potential customers is essential in completing your buyer personas and this again boils down to the needs that the customer have. The company sales people will most likely have the best idea of the customers base and why they buy so when building a buyer persona their insight on the clientele will be very useful. Knowing your clients helps in tailoring the message according to the target groups or buyer persona's needs.

In her book *the Art of Social Selling*, Shannon Belew explains how content one creates is at the heart of social selling but without being of value to the possible customer merely creating content does not make it useful. Again as earlier mentioned understanding your clients needs is the key here as well and reaching your target audience with a message that resonates with them and quite possibly helps solving their problems is considered good content. (p. 60.70, Belew 2014) She also explains how content needs to be other things than work or product related and the aim is to build trust so possible good options are news and trends for example. Creating your own tone of voice is also somewhat important as if it becomes recognizable (much like a brands' tone of voice in marketing, the recognizability and familiarity achieved over time) and people get used to the way you talk they at the same time "know" and remember you better.

Brad Cummings also promotes personalizing your message (p. 44, Cummings 2015) and being a voice of reason rather than resorting to slogans et cetera. According to him it takes time to write material that is concise and complementary but the material and contents works as it is teaching rather than preaching. As the material that one finds useful and effective depends entirely on the audience there topics and correct message requires getting to know your audience and their needs in this case as well.

There are a lot of different types of content and Belew (2014) listed a few of them:

- Evergreen: An evergreen is content—often an article or blog post—that never becomes dated.

- Topical: The opposite of an evergreen, topical content is often based on current news or world events.
- How-to: Any material that is instructional, or provides information that trains you in a particular skill or process, is considered how-to.
- List: Whether you use bullets or numbers to rank details or items, you are creating a list.
- Testimonial: A testimonial can be something as simple and brief as a single quote from a customer or much more in-depth, like a customer case study.
- Q&A: Content that provides direct answers to questions are referred to as Q&A, or Question and Answer.
- Polls/Surveys: Considered to be one of the easiest types of content you can create, quick polls and surveys are a favorite for use online.
- Thought leadership: This type of content takes an in-depth look at a specific topic or trend that impacts your industry.

There are other types of content and hybrids of these as well. I chose to include these as these are the categories I identify the most and these in my view get the most reactions from others and are therefore effective in the social selling context.

Social selling is very much about creating content and this requires creativity. In their study Li Chen, Fengxia Zhu and Murali Mantrala (Chen, Zhu and Mantrala, 2018) found that sellers creative skills significantly enhance the given seller's business performance in social commerce. Community information support (from other sales people for example) from other users on the marketplace platform was seen as a contribution factor to seller's creative behaviour. (Chen, Zhu and Mantrala, 2018)

Best practices such as what to do and what not to do are perhaps something that can be taught to anyone willing to engage in social selling but person's creativity may set them above their competition and personality traits need to be considered as well when executing social selling and evaluating possible strategies for each individual. Something that may come very naturally to one may be hard or even impossible to others, choosing the right people and right type of ways to convey the message is very important as well.

4.1.5 Social Selling Index (SSI) on LinkedIn

LinkedIn social selling index is a combination is calculated by four key things which Karlyn Williams from LinkedIn explain as follows (Williams 2018):

- Establishing a personal brand that consist of posting relevant articles that resonate with your industry and with the professionals you wish to attract. Content may be from a source or original content.
- Finding the right people, LinkedIn has tool to help with this.
- Engaging with insights basically means that you join groups that are filled with individuals from the same industry as where you work and share insights with a non-sales theme.
- Building relationships which means anything from connecting with others to being actually referred by someone in your connections.

Here is the view of Karlyn's own SSI index sheet taken dated February 13, 2018:

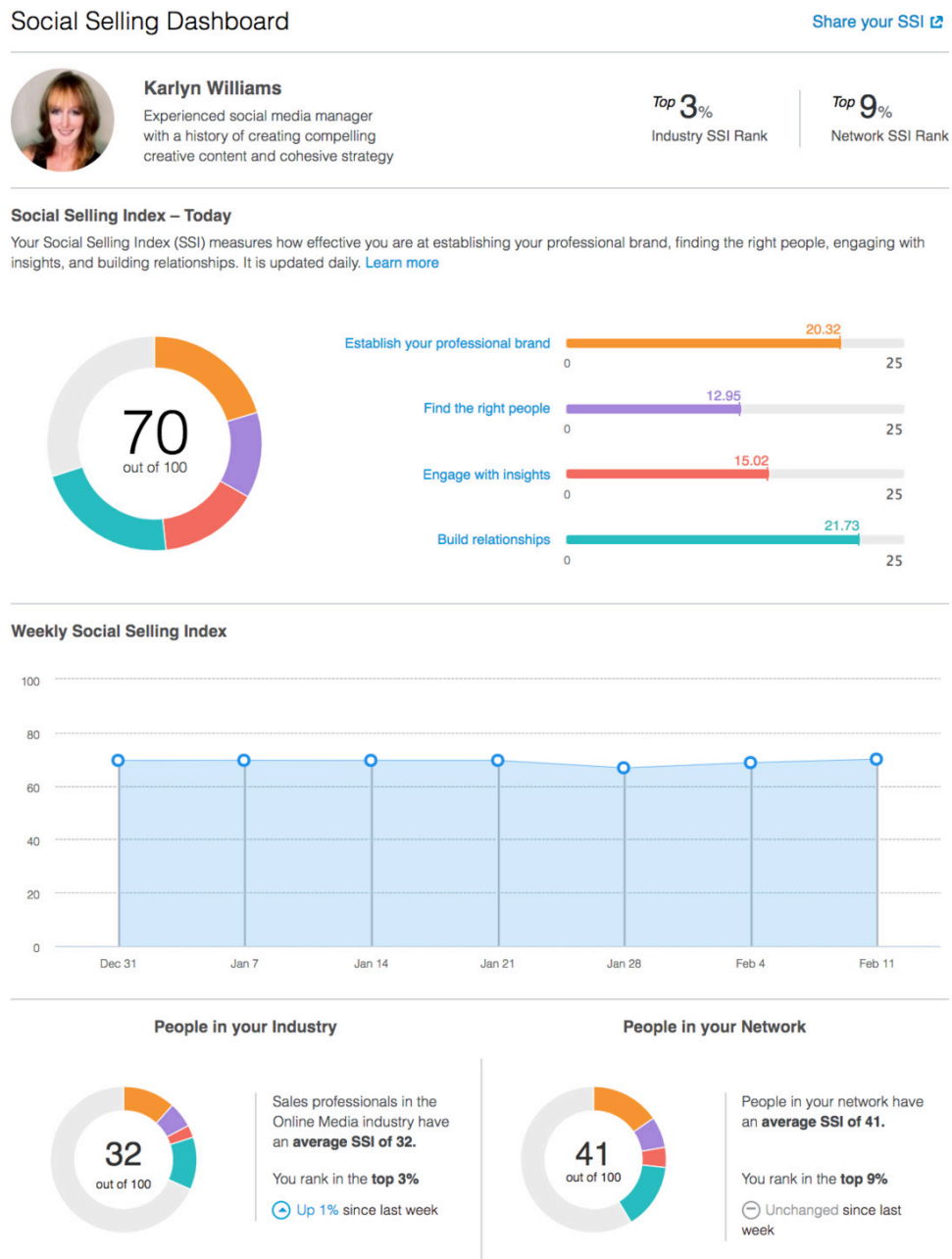


Figure 3: SSI profile of LinkedIn user Karlyn Williams

SSI index is measure between 0 and 100 and the result is also ranked among the professionals in the industry the person operates. LinkedIn does not offer the exact method of calculating this figure but in my personal view the higher the SSI index the more active the person is on LinkedIn and the more reactions the posts gather. Likes, shares and comments are all a part of this so in case one wishes to make the SSI index higher, posting regularly engaging content will most likely result in higher SSI index over time.

4.1.6 Effective social selling

Effective social selling consists of many different aspects already mentioned at this point. Data from a survey conducted by Content Marketing Institute in 2015 where they interviewed over 5000 marketing professionals in 25 different industries from 109 countries gives some indicators on how to conduct a successful social selling strategy. The following statistics are collected from the North American respondents and they reflect how they use content in their marketing. One key takeaway from the research is that 94% of B2B marketers use LinkedIn as a channel to distribute content, thus making it the most often used social media. (Pulizzi, J. and Handley, A., 2015) This would suggest that focusing on LinkedIn is something almost everyone of the respondents has seen as a good decision. 60% of the respondents that reported having a documented strategy rate themselves highly in their contents effectiveness which would suggest that focusing on building a tangible plan on how to use content social media pays off in the long run at least in the way that you personally develop as a social seller. Building a strategy and implementing it on LinkedIn could quite possibly be the way to a positive outcome.

Lawrence Minsky and Keith A. Quesenberry (Minsky and Quesenberry, 2016) in their article rationalise that when sales and marketing align and identify their goals the collaboration will make social selling more effective. This idea is based on the already mentioned subject of sales people having the hands on knowledge regarding the customer base that they can discuss with marketing helping them gain more knowledge on the segment they need to focus on and target. Establishing common ground between marketing and sales inside the company will benefit both functions in added knowledge but it will also prevent information silo's from forming inside those two.

Without the actual content to be published, the strategy and well planned execution is nothing. However, well prepared base for social selling enables the developed content reaching the correct audience more accurately and bringing the desired results.

5 Conclusion

Social media itself is not an old concept and social selling is even newer. The idea for this study rose from my own personal need and established touch point in and outside of working life as social media has been and will most likely be a big part of it in the future as well. Objective of the thesis was to establish how to successfully implement a social selling strategy on LinkedIn. This strategy can then possibly be modified to cover and help with other social media as well. As said the subject of social selling is quite new so the interest was also to create something others may base their future research on.

Knowing your customers needs is a topic that arose a few times along the way and this is the basis of selling and it will be the basis of implementing successful social selling as well. In the end of chapter 3.1.1 the old Peter Drucker's view on marketing was updated to "the aim of marketing is to help social selling make traditional selling unnecessary" and this should be the goal when aiming for the social selling strategy in any given industry the person or company operates in. The strategy may be a company strategy where the company decides on behalf of the individuals but this does not mean that the individual searching for thought leadership should focus only on what the organization decides as they may very well be a more creative source for good and engaging original content than the marketing department usually creating output shared by many individuals in the organization.

Important aspects to consider regarding social selling and sales funnel are the changes that it makes to buying behavior and especially to the spot on which the possible future customer enters the sales funnel. The buying behavior is different as well as is the clients possibility of searching information and comparing options without ever talking to a salesperson. Furthermore the salesperson's possibility of affecting the buying behavior has diminished in the world of buying through social media. This is also an important thing to consider when evaluating the meaningfulness of implementing social selling as if a buyer has already decided on a product which may not be what "we" offer, how dangerous may that be for our business if we do not have a strategy for social selling as a company? Firms could do themselves a favor by implementing Etteson's SAVE framework found on page 13 for example.

When talking about company strategy in social selling it is important to have sales and marketing working together under the same metrics. That way enables sales giving marketing valuable information regarding the customer base to build a buyer persona for example but as established before a very creative mind may be well off in the world of social selling even without working with marketing as thought leadership is built in many ways. Content created toward establishing trust with the broad audience is a great way to be referenced by your connections as a professional to turn to when someone is having a need that needs to be fulfilled.

As social selling is about content, that content should be well thought and targeted to resonate with the target audience. Understanding customers is easier for those who work with customers face to face and uphold the existing relationship but also form new ones. For a salesperson to find out what the customers needs are should be quite easy as with the existing customer relationships those needs have been fulfilled already. Talking with customers and asking them about what is going on in the industry they operate in is a very good way of finding out potential problems that they are facing or might face in the future. These problems can be translated to needs which may translate to content directed to the segment that has potential in case the salesperson is. The creative mind comes up with solutions that originate from the person's own professionalism and ways to find out and solve customers problems. On page 18 the reader can find different reasons or functions for creating content that serve the purpose of building authority in a given field where the publisher operates in.

Some of the different types of content have been listed on page 19. Using one's strong suit when selecting the type of content is wise as if one wishes to establish professionalism and to convey a message which shows that the person knows what they are talking about and knows what their clients needs needing fulfillment are, they should also choose the right method of delivering that message most effectively.

The study does not focus on how exactly to create content as that is a subject very much linked to a given industry, what may work some where may not work elsewhere. Sales' expertise about the industry is the key. Knowing customers' needs and creating that tone of voice, which separates them from the competition and lands them on the minds of their connections as a reference on LinkedIn will bring leads when someone is searching a solution to their need. Social selling implemented effectively helps generating these free leads which may turn out to customer relationships through the funnel.

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